A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Chapter 45

Tarkin was having a very dull day dealing with Senate affairs when he got the message on the Chancellor's podium's monitor.

TRAITOR DARK JEDI ESERA KOMARA LOCATED ON EMBERLENE. TERMINATE? Y/N.

The message was from Greejatus. Or someone using Greejatus's name. The man had sent a team to Emberlene several days ago, hunting for an artifact. Tarkin sent his one-character message back:

Y.

Who was Esera Komara? Tarkin had no idea. He or she was a traitor, and the punishment for treason was death. That was all he needed to know.

"Your ship has failed, Raxian," General Taclai said. "They're adrift, their guns are silent, and now the Alliance is coming straight at us."

Esera watched the tactical layout of the star system. The little hologram dot that was *Encounter* was on an exit trajectory from the star system. She'd reach the local heliopause in a few years, if nothing interfered. Every second took *Encounter* further and further away from the remnants of the Alliance fleet, who were descending on the nineteen remaining Emberlener ships.

But Esera could not have cared less about them. Her heart was with her crew. Who knew what had befallen *Encounter*? They'd gotten in close to a Kuat-made ship, and something had boarded them, then the engines went out. That was all anyone knew.

"My ship gave your Armada a fighting chance," Esera said back, with as much calm as she could muster. "You may yet hold Emberlene's orbitals, if you're as good as you claim you are."

Voyan stirred where he stood. *Yeah, I know, I'm not being diplomatic,* thought Esera. *I'm not in a mood for putting up with these ungrateful cretins any more than you are.*

"Why would they go adrift?" Voyan muttered under his breath. The wheels in his engineer's brain were turning, trying to figure out what happened to their ship. "Durm, what's going on over there?"

Meanwhile, the Alliance ships dived down from interplanetary space. The Emberleners were stuck, they couldn't leave the planet to build up speed and meet them, they couldn't stand still and make themselves easy targets. Esera was glad not to be the admiral right now.

The emerging skirmish between the two remnant fleets became a sideshow the moment the transports turned up on Emberlener light wave scanners. The Mistryl Army headquarters became abuzz with orders and inquiries. "Ah, there they are," said Eldest Aredian.

"You were expecting them?" asked Esera.

"The enemy would have been foolish to have their landing forces present for the space battle. With our Armada occupied, they will land uncontested, but for ground-based defense." Aredian nodded to herself. "They sacrificed their ships to get their troops in. And you can bet Sun Guard will be among them. If you'll excuse me, Lady Komara, I must prepare for battle."

Sanya's mouth had gone dry. *Clone commandos? Here? In the Authala Sector? At Emberlene!?* Her hands had started to shake again. The darkness and silence around her didn't help, only the red emergency lights were on, and there was no sound but the breathing of the group.

Apparently, Zule was just as confused. "What are they doing here?" she hissed, eyes burning. "The Republic isn't even in this sector!"

"Neither are we, officially," said Durm.

"Just another damn proxy war getting out of hand," Oto grumbled. "What kind of droids do we have on this ship? Tell me we've got those BX-series, or B2s, at least. Those always gave us trouble on my last ship."

"Yeah, about that..." Zule swallowed, and let out a shaky breath. She tapped the screen on the walls. "The logs say someone named Khan took everything but a few squads of OOM-series security droids, several months ago. Apparently that's when this ship's title went over to Captain Komara... from this very same Khan. I think she got a bad deal."

"Khan!" Alize slammed a fist into her palm. "That damn droid's screwed us over!"

"Khan's a droid?" asked Sanya.

"Nasty one, too," said Alize. "Esera doesn't like him one bit, now you see why. I'm gonna tear that machine into scrap metal next time I see him-"

"One enemy at a time," said Durm, bringing a hand to his headset. "Captain Buna, you're seeing this? Ensign Xiss says we've only got a few security droids. Yeah, I agree, captain. Right. Understood."

"Orders, sir?" Oto asked him.

"Captain says we're to cause them as much trouble as we reasonably can." Durm looked over everyone. "Alize, Sanya, you're not military, you should stay out of this."

The Zygerrian and Devaronian exchanged a tense glance. Neither were fighters. Neither were trained to fight. But this was their ship! How could they sit by and do nothing when it was being invaded? On the other hand, those were *clone commandos* coming in through the hangar. Sanya had seen the remains of their work firsthand.

"Alize, we're not prepared for this," Sanya said. "The only thing more dangerous than a clone commando is an ARC trooper. Frying pans and garden hoses aren't going to stop them."

"You're right, we're not prepared," said Alize, crossing her arms. "Like hell if I'm gonna sit around doing nothing, though!"

I knew you'd say that, thought Sanya, stomach twisting.

"We've got an armory aboard," Durm said.

"The commandos have personal shield generators," Sanya said. "It'll take more than small arms to stop them."

"Shields mean little to me," said Murshida, tapping the butt of his vibro-axe on the deck. "And Zule has a lightsword, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, but it's in my cabin," said Zule.

"Fighting commandos is more than I signed on for," Oto muttered. "I'm trained on hyperdrives, not blasters."

Durm stared down the corridor. "Every moment we stand here talking is a moment they have to move. Lieutenant Oto, take Alize and Sanya somewhere safe. Escape pod, that's my recommendation. Ensign Xiss, get your lasersword. Mister Murshida, you're with me, we're defending the reactor until it can power up again."

"Yes, sir," said Oto, and she grabbed Sanya by the arm. "Come on, you too, Alize."

"But-" Alize started, but Zule stepped forward.

"Alize!" Zule gave her a stern look. "There is *nothing* you can do to stop one of these guys. These aren't normal clones, they don't have normal rules of engagement. Get in their way and they *will* kill you, civvie or not. Got it?"

The big Zygerrian opened her mouth, but then closed it, and nodded, ears wilting in defeat.

Sanya, for one, was glad to be out of the commandos' way.

The Felinians were a curious race, in Grievous's eyes. They looked much like Humans, but with triangular furry ears and slim furry tails, their pupils were slits and their fangs were long and sharp. The splice between Human and beast was so perfect that it never would have come about on its own. *These things aren't natural,* Grievous thought, looking at the hologram before him. But he held his proverbial tongue, and kept his focus on his task.

"In a week I will be sending you my best agent," Grievous told his counterpart on Zoma V. "She will set everything up between us."

"So you say," said the Felinian chieftain, sneering. He might have been old, Grievous wasn't sure. White hair was a sign of age in most Humans, but some had white hair from birth. Maybe Felinians did too. "The Hutt slavers came again, General. They demand tribute if the raids are to stop. I have lost hundreds- thousands of my people. And for what? Empty words from a monster in the stars, who speaks to us as a ghost? Where are the guns? Where are the ships?"

In the old days, such an attitude would not have earned this chieftain any favors from Grievous. Today, the roar of engines filled his ears, and instead of the hologram in the dark, he saw a huk ship lumbering into the sky, leaving behind a village razed to the ground. That bitterness and fury beneath this man's voice, Grievous knew all too well. But he still had his pride.

"If you want your guns and ships, swear allegiance to me, right now," Grievous said, leaning forward into the hologram transmitter. Far, far away, his life-size *ghostly* image loomed over the Felinian chieftain. "End these pointless negotiations, save your people."

"I will not pledge fealty to an outsider!" the chieftain said, his hand settling on the hilt of the dagger in his belt. "Guns and ships, General, and treasure to give to my warriors. Then I will consider what you have to say."

"Then for your sake, pray Lady Komara arrives soon," Grievous said. He shut down the transmission. *Arrogant fool,* he thought. He could understand the chieftain's position. He could even understand the Felinian's disgust at the idea of kneeling to an alien. But he was not going to arm a primitive, war-like people without any guarantees of allegiance. Grievous saw his reflection in the window, and knew exactly what kind of problem he could create if he did that. Komara would be able to handle the Felinians. She'd get a deal hammered out with them.

Grievous paced about his chamber atop *Invisible Hand*'s tower. The Hutts had antagonized the Felinians through centuries of slave raiding, and the Felinians had become a warrior culture to oppose them. Grievous could make great use of that, especially if Komara's reports about a Hutt build-up were accurate. They would be the tip of the spear in Kronaak's revolution. Dropping a few thousand screaming Felinian warriors on some Hutt planet was a delightful idea. They might even be scarier than droids. And Grievous was looking to save on droids wherever he could, as he reshaped the Confederacy's war machine. Whatever ended up happening in Hutt Space, it would be a sideshow compared to the real war against the Republic.

But, seeing the Hutts burn would be worth it. His heads-up display overlaid his vision, and Grievous checked what new stolen freighters Kronaak was adding to his little fleet.

Sanya, Alize, and Oto made it fifty meters before they heard voices. *I know that voice anywhere,* she thought, motioning for the others to stay silent. Two clones were near, but it wasn't just them.

"Don't move!" one said. "Hands on your head, get down on the ground!"

"Like hell!" came the reptilian hiss in response. *Buna!*

"Have it your way, Seppie."

Alize clamped a hand over her mouth as the blasters fired. *No way,* Sanya thought. She pulled the other two back around the corner, and they heard footsteps on the decking, moving away from them, towards the bridge. They waited a few moments, before rushing to where they heard the gunfire.

Buna laid sprawled on the deck, three smoking blaster wounds in her chest. For a second, Sanya was frozen. That Buna might fall to a mere blaster shot or three was impossible. With a deep breath, Sanya gathered her nerves. Buna wasn't dead, there was no way she was dead.

"They killed her," Oto said, faintly, recovering her ability to speak at the same time.

"Wait..." Sanya knelt down beside the big Barabel, and put her hand on her. She closed her eyes, and opened herself to the Force. Something was there, weak and faint. "She's alive. I feel it in the Force. But she needs help. Oto, do you know anything about medicine?"

"Just the emergency medical training I got while serving with the Republic," she said.

"Use it," Sanya told her.

"Since when did you start giving orders, civvie?" Oto asked her.

"You're not a front line combatant, I have been," said Sanya. That technically was true, she'd shot a few droids and ridden a STAP before when the Separatists showed up unexpectedly on a quiet farming planet. Here she was now, helping the Separatists. That was a dirty feeling, one that made her stomach twist. "I'm going to see what those commandos are up to. If they've got access to the bridge..."

"Right." Oto nodded. "Alize, help me get Buna into one of these cabins. There's usually a medpack in the emergency locker."

What are you doing, Sanya? she asked herself, not daring to even whisper. *The idea was to get away from the commandos, not closer!* As offended over Sanya's perceived betrayal as Esera was, she'd never rescinded the home she'd offered. *Encounter* was where Sanya lived, the only place in the Galaxy she belonged. Scared she might be, but being scared didn't mean she couldn't find her own way to be useful. This was her chance. Not as a warrior, but in a way that only she could be at this moment.

Up ahead, she saw the bridge blast doors were already open, a field of stars outside. Four white armored figures were in there, but nothing else. Sanya crouched in the shadows of the corridor, the sparse red emergency lighting her ally. She attuned herself to the Force as much as she could, and listened.

"If the droids aren't here, where are they?" a clone asked.

"Who even knows? Wherever they are, we'll scrap them."

"We need to find the new control center. These computers are bricked, it'll take hours to get them online and they'll just be destroyed along with everything else when we're done here."

"I agree. Alright, the bridge is useless, we'll check main engineering next. Any Seppie pops up again, waste them."

The other three voices answered as one: "Yes, sir!"

Sanya darted down a side corridor, and stayed very still in the darkness until the commandos passed. *Great, they're going to try to destroy the ship from the inside. And Zule was right, they're just gonna kill us if they see us!*

There was no choice, she had to find the others and tell them. She trusted Oto and Alize to take care of Buna.

The mercenary dropships entered the atmosphere in the early afternoon, local time. Esera watched their holograms come in over the map, headed straight for the city. Behind them came the bulkier transports of the Authala Alliance. The Emberlener Armada had folded after only an hour of battle.

"Here comes the Sun Guard," Admiral Ladelia said, tapping her fingers on the holotable. "Will they go for the spaceport or the palace first?"

"If it's the palace, I need to get changed into something I can fight in," said Esera. "Come on, Miha, let's get ready, just in case."

Voyan was staring at a smaller display, tracking *Encounter's* trajectory. So far, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "Right," said Voyan, clearly distracted.

"They'll get through this," Esera whispered. "Believe in them."

"Right."

It was only natural the chief engineer of a ship would have his mind elsewhere, as his ship hurtled unguided through space without him.

Esera switched out her diplomat's dress for what she considered her combat gear. She'd outgrown her sneaking outfit that she'd used on Naboo months ago, but she'd replaced it with something similar but better. Like the old one, the two-piece outfit was close-fitting enough to make her self-conscious, but it left little material to catch on anything, was flexible and comfortable enough to fight in, and masked much of her heat signature. A hooded cloak made of the same dark material was her biggest addition. Unfortunately, being dressed in a deep grey that was nearly black made her feel more like a Sith than a Jedi. But maybe that was a good thing, in the Outer Rim.

Voyan wasn't expected to be a combatant, he didn't bring a weapon and had no such clothes suited to battle. "What am I supposed to do?" he asked.

"Tech things, I guess," said Esera.

"What's that supposed to mean? And aren't you supposed to be brokering a peace treaty here?"

"Look-" Esera took a deep breath. "There's not much you can do now that the battle is on the planet. And yes, I am here to make peace between these people. But I don't think anyone's going to listen unless I get in their face with a lightsaber. The Sun Guard have a grudge, they'll probably come in here guns blazing. We need to be ready for that."

"By *we* you mean you," said Voyan.

"...Yeah."

Voyan sat down on a sofa, and took his datapad out of his jacket pocket. "I'll see what I can get out of the Emberlener military network. Their security protocols are so bad even *I* can get past them."

Esera hadn't even left the room before Voyan jumped up from the sofa. "What is it?" she asked him.

"Uh..." Voyan fumbled with the datapad, and it projected a scene from the city. A squad of men who were not Sun Guard and definitely not mercenaries were about. "Are these what I think they are?" he asked.

"ARC troopers," sighed Esera. She knew those pauldrons and Mandalorian kamas. "Looks like we're not the only ones with an interest in Emberlene. I'm going to go check this out."

"Over a hundred Jedi on Coruscant have pledged themselves to our cause, my lord," Ardabur Aspar told Tarkin, in his office. The Senate's business had concluded and night fell across this sector of the city-planet, though Coruscant never slept and was never truly dark. Looking out over the endless skyline, lit in every color of the rainbow, he did feel a distant longing for the solitude and unspoiled beauty of Eriadu's wilderness. It'd been decades since he'd last gone hunting up in the mountains.

"And on the front lines?" Tarkin asked.

"Five hundred, and more every day. We've had a few dozen masters come over, but the rest are young knights, like myself, or orphaned padawans. That doesn't surprise me." Aspar crossed his arms, and turned his masked face out to the city. "This war has decimated the Jedi ranks. We were not prepared for it. My one hope now is that enough of us survive to rebuild the Jedi into something better. But it'll be years before this war ends. A new generation could grow up during it, again."

"Perhaps," said Tarkin.

Aspar glanced at him. "You've got a trick up your sleeve, Chancellor."

"There are terrible beasts on my home planet. Great hulking creatures, black-furred, terribly nasty temperament. They can heal almost any wound in a matter of minutes. The only way to kill one swiftly, is to deliver a fatal strike to its brain." Tarkin spun around in his chair, back to his desk, and Aspar pulled away from the window to stay in his vision.

"That sounds applicable to our current situation," said Aspar.

"Indeed. How could such a strike be delivered, my boy?"

The former Jedi straightened his back, and put a hand on the chin of his mask. "We'd need to hit Raxus while Grievous is down there. Hit it like we hit Pammant last year."

"Beyond the initial impact point, casualties on Pammant were low," said Tarkin. "The effects of the impact weren't widespread until after the evacuation was completed. There's no way to control a relativistic weapon like that with precision."

"Orbital bombardment, then."

"Yes, that would do the job. If we could get a fleet past the rebels that deep in their own territory, and catch Grievous on the surface. He'd bolt for orbit the moment we entered the system."

For a moment, Aspar thought more. "An agent with a fusion bomb. A dedicated agent, willing to die for the cause."

"A nuclear suicide bomber, how devious!" Tarkin chuckled. "No, the rebel counter-intelligence is surprisingly adept at stopping such plots. They're better now than ever."

"We'd need something that could carry enough reactant to make it so far into rebel territory. Something that could hit hard and fast, quick enough to destroy Grievous and hard enough precision doesn't matter." Aspar tilted his head. "You're working on such a weapon, aren't you, my lord?"

"It's hard to keep secrets from a mind-reader." Tarkin brought up the hologram of the Ultimate Weapon's plans, and remained silent as Aspar poured over them.

"This is real, right?" he finally asked. "You're actually building this?"

Tarkin brought up still images of the battle station's spherical frame. "It'll be armed and operational in two years, with enough resources."

"And this superlaser? You actually got it working?"

"*That,* young Aspar, is the problem." Tarkin leaned back in his chair. "Director Krennic assures me he's got Doctor Erso working as hard as he can, but technological challenges of such a device are... immense."

"All this to kill Grievous?"

"To kill Grievous, to kill each and every one of those traitors on Raxus, and to blast a hole in the Galaxy's memory so deep no one will ever think of secession again. I intend to put the fear of the Republic into the heart of every rebel and alien there is."

Aspar nodded. "We cannot allow anarchy, my lord."

Up ahead, there was blaster fire, and a lot of it. Sanya's heart pounded in her chest as she passed by dozens of fallen security droids. Many of them had been behind what cover they could find in *Encounter*'s corridors, but against clone commando shielding and precision, they were getting the worst of it by far. Hadn't someone told her there were marine battle droids aboard? Those would surely have heavier weapons than blasters at their disposal. And where were the super battle droids? The droidekas? All those terrifying machines Sanya had learned about in security briefings?

It figures I end up on the one Separatist ship that's only got basic battle droids, she thought, trying to focus on her disappointment so that the fear didn't overwhelm her. She forced herself onward, through the fallen droids, getting closer to the shooting. Now she could see red and blue flashes ahead.

"Look out!" a clone voice shouted.

One of the commandos went flying through an intersection, and Sanya froze. A whirl of red and silver followed him- *Murshida!* The huge Skakoan swept out with his vibro-ax, sparks flying as it slashed across the chest plate of the commando. Murshida raised his left arm, and poured a stream of blaster fire into the clone until his shield failed and his armor was melted to slag. He was now taking fire from the other commandos, and dashed down the corridor, almost colliding with Sanya.

"Miss Sanya!" Murshida said, surprised. "You must go, this is no place for-"

One of the commandos peered around the corner, and opened up. Murshida flung Sanya aside and suddenly doubled over.

"Mister Murshida! Are you alright?" Sanya gasped.

"One of my servos is hit," Murshida said, very quietly. "Go, Sanya. Now."

Sanya rushed away from the battle, jumping behind a bulkhead. Murshida let out a terrible roar, and threw himself back at the clones. "Leave us!" a clone shouted. "Finish the mission!" A blast door slammed shut, somewhere down the hall. Sanya didn't see what happened, but Murshida limped away, a dead commando behind him. His breath was ragged.

"Did they get you?" Sanya asked.

"I got myself," Murshida told her. He slumped against the wall. "I had to use my combat drugs. I shouldn't be using them at my age. They take too much out of me... I'm sorry, Sanya, I was only able to get two. The others are up to the rest of you."

Murshida slowly fell to his knees, and then forwards, clanking against the deck. He was alive, but totally unconscious. Sanya gulped. She could still hear blasters somewhere. *Durm was at main engineering... But can I leave Murshida here, like this?* The Skakoan was over two meters tall, and with his armored pressure suit, probably weighed two hundred kilograms. Sanya was a meter and a half tall, and not even forty-five kilograms, there was no way she could drag Murshida anywhere. She was just too small. "Sorry, big guy," she whispered, patting the passed-out warrior's shoulder. "I need to warn Durm and the others!"

Today, Sanya was glad she was so small. It was easy to hide in the shadows, and take cover in nooks and crannies whenever she saw the flashes of blasters. The droids were still fighting at least, but not as intensely as before. After what felt like hours, Sanya made it the hundreds of meters from the bridge to main engineering... and discovered the enemy had beaten her there, too.

One clone, two clones, three clones- *What? There were only four in the hangar-* she noticed, then, the melted armor plate of one. He'd survived Murshida's attack. *Great, that's just great!*

"The Seppies have sealed the reactor chamber," said one clone. "It'd take half an hour to cut through this door with what we've got, sir. But if we rigged up some explosives..."

"We need the explosives for the reactor," said the one who must have been the leader.

"Why not just set the reactor to overload?"

"That'd mean one of us stays behind to oversee it. There were four of us this morning, now there's three. I'm not interested in making it two."

"Then we cut through the doors, sir."

The commander shook his head. "That gives them time to regroup. Who knows if they have another one of those Skakoan monsters. Or if Komara herself turns up again."

Komara? They think Esera's on board? Zule had a green lightsaber, and Zeltrons were identical to Humans in every external way but skin color... In this red light, a Zeltron could easily be mistaken for a Human.

"The file says Komara's a coward. I think that wound we gave her scared her off, sir." The clone chuckled.

"Regardless, we're going to plan C. Move aft."

"Yes, sir!"

What was aft of main engineering? Nothing but the dead engines and hyperdrive... a hyperdrive full of gamma radiation that could kill every living thing aboard the ship. Sanya's blood went cold. Now she *really* had to find Durm.

Soon enough the blasters started up again, as the clones ran into another group of droids. Sanya ran right into the rest of the crew and some other droids shortly after. "Zule!" Sanya gasped.

"Sanya, what the hell are you doing here?" Zule asked. Her shoulder was bleeding.

"Sanya," said a roughed-up Durm, "I told you to get to cover!"

"Murshida's out cold, Buna's barely alive," Sanya said. "The clones, they're going to sabotage the hyperdrive!"

"Lovely," Durm grumbled. He had a bacta patch over his side, and cuts across his face, his engineer's jumpsuit looked shredded on one side. *Fragmentation grenade,* Sanya thought, recognizing those wounds. "I take it Buna left the bridge inoperable?"

"Yeah, it's bricked, the clones said. It'll take hours to reboot those systems." Sanya gulped again. "How do we stop these guys?"

"I've got Klaud holed up in auxiliary damage control. He's trying to find a way to vent the section they're in, but our reserve power situation is getting worse by the moment." Durm shifted where he sat, and winced. "Sanya, how much training did you get at that Jedi Temple?"

"Sir," Zule said quietly, "she's Service Corps, she hasn't held a lightsaber in almost ten years-"

"But I've held a blaster a lot more recently than that," Sanya said. *No, no, no, what are you doing?* she asked herself. *The idea was to get away from the commandos, not closer!* But *Encounter* was running short of people who could stop the clones. And if they didn't stop those clones, everyone aboard was as good as dead, from Alize to Zule. *I have to do this,* Sanya thought, as she breathed deeply. *If not me, then who?*

Durm grimaced. "I don't like sending civvies into combat," he said.

"Do or die, Durm," Sanya said.

The Neimoidian beckoned over the droid commander. OOM-451, most likely. "Captain Buna is incapacitated, so am I, and Lieutenant Oto cannot be reached. Commander, I am relinquishing command of this ship and all aboard to Ensign Zule Xiss."

"Roger, roger," said the droid, who promptly turned to Zule. "Ensign Xiss, what are your orders?"

Zule blinked. "Um... Okay, we need to head aft. *Fast.*"

"How does your first command feel, Zule?" Sanya asked her, as they rushed towards the tram tunnel that would take them to the hyperdrive.

"Awful, positively awful," Zule said. "You got any ideas on how to deal with the clones?"

"Droid network records indicate the most successful tactic against clone commandos is to isolate them and overwhelm them. They are weakest alone," said the droid commander.

"Great," Zule said. "How do we do that?"

"I've got an idea," said Sanya.

The Sun Guard and other mercenaries had gone straight for the palace upon landing, but the ARC troopers were headed into the city proper. Esera borrowed a landspeeder from the palace motorpool and went after them. If the Republic was involved here, she needed to find out why.

"*They're headed downtown*," Voyan's voice spoke into her earpiece.

"Got it."

The fighting was on the other side of the palace, Esera slipped out without issue and blasted down the streets at irresponsibly high speed. As she went, she saw streaks of fire high in the sky. The remains of the Emberlene Armada falling out of orbit. Starfighters swooped down and engaged turbolaser towers, missiles corkscrewed after dropships and transports, and by the minute the battle began spreading across the entire city as Authala Alliance soldiers seized whatever ground their ships touched down on. Columns of smoke rose and sirens wailed.

"*They're going to the damn museum!*" said Voyan. "*What are the clones doing at the museum?*"

"Of all the places to attack..." Esera stopped her speeder outside the regal building. The clones were already inside, Esera caught a glimpse of a LAAT's wing. The Emberlene Museum of Art and History held centuries worth of collected battle trophies, and the most noted cultural products of the planet. What could the Republic want with a small local power's art?

The inside of the museum was as grandiose as the outside, a monument to superiority and victory. There were weapons, suits of armor, flags and standards, speeder bikes, tanks, and even whole starfighters inside, trophies from across the stars wherever the Mistryl Army had fought. *Not much art in here,* thought Esera. She could sense the clones nearby. Most were ahead... and one behind.

Esera whipped around, lightsaber flashing on, just in time to slash a blaster pistol's barrel clean off. The clone trooper's armor was white, with green markings. She had just enough time to identify him as an ARC sergeant before he swung a fist at her. Esera jumped up and delivered a kick straight to his faceplate. The clone grunted and fell, his head hitting the corner of a display. Protected by the helmet as he was, he went out cold.

"*Nice,*" Voyan remarked.

"You're still watching me?" Esera whispered.

"*Museums's cameras are tied into the military network. No idea why, but I bet it's related to whatever brought the clones here.*"

"Sergeant, report," came the voice of another clone.

Esera took cover behind an ancient starfighter, as a clone with blue stripes on his armor approached. "Sergeant's down," the clone said. "We've got company."

"Not a problem, we'll blast our way out," said their leader. "We've got the package."

"*I'm looking through the recordings to find out* what *that package is,*" Voyan said.

Good thinking, Esera wished she could stay.

"Nothing's coming up on thermals, sir."

"I smell Jedi." A clone stepped into Esera's view, with the red stripes of a captain. "And where there's Jedi, there's deception."

These are definitely Alpha ARCs, Esera thought. Alphas had never been subjected to the same brainwashing as their less-able brothers.

"Sir, Emberlener forces are closing in."

"*It's a little black pyramid,*" Voyan said. "*It could fit in the palm of your hand.*"

"Holocron," whispered Esera. *Sith* holocron. She stood up, and revealed herself, as a dozen guns pointed her way.

"Ah, there she is," said the ARC captain.

"Who sent you after that thing?" asked Esera.

The clone ignored her. "You must be Esera Komara, the Dark Jedi."

"You're half right," Esera said, gritting her teeth at that label. "Who sent you?"

"The Chancellor signed an order for your termination, Komara. We're duty-bound to oblige."

Being ignored twice annoyed her. "You really think you can?" asked Esera.

"We've been ready to take down you Jedi from day one," the ARC said. "You're just target practice."

All at once, the clones opened up. Esera twirled her lightsaber, but immediately, she was forced back into cover. *The holocron,* she told herself, noticing the black box on the captain's utility belt.

"Captain, the Emberleners are here!"

"Move out!"

Esera chased them, but the clones leapfrogged their retreat, one man falling back as the others covered him, cycling through with the silent, instinctual precision of the ARC troopers. Their hail of blaster fire kept her at bay as they steadily drew near the entrance of the museum and their waiting gunship. True to form, all the clones loaded up, with their captain going last. They'd even recovered the knocked-out sergeant.

"Oh no you don't!" Esera said, using the Force to yank the ARC captain off the gunship as it took off. He tumbled across the pavement of the street, and Esera wrenched the black box off his belt.

Nothing was in there.

"I thought you'd try that," said the captain, getting to his feet. The gunship was rapidly retreating. "My men have the artifact, and they're long gone now. It's just you and me, Jedi."

"They sure were fast to abandon you," said Esera.

"The mission comes first, Jedi. My men know that." The captain opened up with his blaster. Esera rushed at him, lightsaber deflected the bolts. In a moment, she'd disarmed him, and had the clone on the ground, blade at his neck. She pulled his helmet off with the Force.

"Let's try this again," Esera said. "You tell me-"

The clone's foot shot up, kicked her square in the chest. Esera stumbled back as he jumped to his feet, and then the clone backhanded her, armored gauntlet knocking her to the ground. There was nothing but a cold sneer on the ARC captain's face as he lifted her up by the throat, hands squeezing. Esera was dazed, she couldn't breath, darkness closed in around her eyes, Voyan was shouting something in her earpiece-

The clone suddenly screamed, dropping her. He clutched his head in his hands, and fell to his knees.

"Most impressive," said an icy, clear voice. "I thought surely, Lady Komara would best a mere meat-puppet of a man." Mila Aredian, Eldest of Emberlene, stood outside a troop transport, flanked by the Mistryl Shadow Guard. She was clad in armor, and her frail hand stretched out towards the writhing clone.

"Thank you," Esera managed to choke out, rubbing her throat.

"I still have need of you, Lady Komara. I won't have need of this clone soon. Why are you here, boy?"

"I'll never-" The clone screamed, and fell to the pavement. "Get *out!*"

"What brought you here?" Aredian asked, slowly walking closer. All the infirmity of age had deserted her, she strode with power. Her eyes had changed, red-rimmed irises flecked with yellow. The dark side surged around her.

"Go to hell!" croaked the clone, face contorted in agony. His eyes rolled back in their sockets, and he toppled over, his whole body shuddering.

"Oh, I see." Aredian smiled. "Lady Komara, does the name Greejatus ring a bell?"

"Yes..." said Esera.

"He sent them here to take one of our trophies. We ourselves took it from the Sun Guard a long time ago. A little black pyramid, indestructible." Aredian's burning yellow eyes turned to Esera. "You know of what I speak, child."

"Yes," said Esera. Her right hand spasmed as that evil gaze fell on her, and she moved towards her lightsaber on the ground. "It's a Sith holocron. I have no idea what's in it."

"Interesting," said Aredian. She dropped her hand, and the yellow in her eyes faded away, until they were a natural brown. The dark side retreated, and the tropical heat Esera hadn't noticed was missing, returned. "Well, Lady Komara, if you want to negotiate with the enemy, now's a good time."

"How'd you know I was here?" Esera asked.

"Call it a premonition," said Aredian. "You can do whatever you like with that meat-puppet. I can't promise he'll ever recover."

The ARC captain lay still now, breathing faintly, blood dripping from his nose and ears. In the old legends, the Sith were masters of infiltrating the very minds of their foes. Aredian had gone into this clone's mind with a wrecking ball. *She's strong in the dark side, but not refined,* Esera thought. But she recalled what Aredian had told Voyan the other day.

"Voyan," she said. "Stay where you are, I'm coming to get you."

"*Good idea,*" said Voyan. "*I don't want to be left a drooling imbecile.*"

Clearly, his mind had gone to the same place. Esera looked at the clone captain on the ground. That man had come within moments of killing her. But now he lay helpless in the middle of an enemy city. Esera sighed, and already knew what she was going to do.

Zule raised her hand: the commandos were coming. *Encounter*'s battery power was running down, it hadn't been designed to last this long. *Why* the reactor wasn't back online, Sanya didn't know. Durm or Klaud must have done something remotely. Perhaps the lack of power was an advantage, but Sanya didn't see it that way. If the reactor was online, she wouldn't be standing by a blast door control panel, holding cables plugged into a marine battle droid's powerpack.

Here we go, Sanya thought. Zule dropped her hand, and Sanya slammed the cables into the control panel. One clone made it through before the blast door slammed shut.

"What the-"

The droids opened fire, red bolts glancing off the commando's shields. They'd never get through them before the clone dispatched his attackers, but they were just a distraction.

Zule jumped in while the clone was bombarded, lightsaber in hand, and bashed it against the shield again and again.

"Out of my way!" the clone yelled, punching Zule. The shield unit on his back was leaking smoke, Sanya took aim with her borrowed blaster pistol and shot. But even as she did so, the clone had turned his gun on the droids and mowed them down. Finally, the shield went out, but the clone was no fool. He ignored Sanya's little pistol, its shots only scorched his armor, and he went for Zule.

A vibroblade sprang out of his vambrace, and he lunged for the Zeltron girl. He got a long gash on Sanya's flesh-and-blood armor, but she hit back with her metal one, dazing the commando.

Sanya picked up the fallen lightsaber, and threw it. "Zule!" she shouted. Zule caught it, the blade flashed on, and she plunged it into the chest of the clone. He swung up with his vibroblade, nicking Zule's thigh, and then shuddered, and fell.

"I don't know if I can do this again," Zule groaned, leaning against the bulkhead.

"Come on, we need to get to the hyperdrive," said Sanya. "Can we set up another trap there?"

"We can try," Zule said. "Uh... grab those detonators, off the droids. And that rocket launcher."

"We can't use a rocket on our own ship!"

"The other choice is dying," Zule said. "Do as I say."

Sanya obeyed. They'd lost their droids, temporarily. The drones could repair them with a steady supply of replacement parts. But that would only happen if they stopped the clones from killing everything aboard the ship. As they ran through the increasingly dim corridors, Sanya noticed Zule beginning to struggle. "Those cuts need to be treated," she told the Zeltron.

"No time," grunted Zule. "We need to get to the tram before the battery power runs out entirely."

The weight on Sanya's back wasn't good for her, either. The rocket launcher was heavy, the strap felt like it was trying to cut through her shoulder. *I've never been this far back,* thought Sanya. She'd studied *Encounter*'s deck plans before, there wasn't all that much in the ship that was habitable. A few decks below main engineering, there was a tram that ran the remaining length of the ship, which would take them all the way to the hyperdrive at the back. Normally, a turbolift would get them there in a matter of seconds, but with the lifts out, Sanya and Zule had to climb down a series of ladders. Zule grunted and winced every time she put weight on her lacerated leg. Drops of blood plopped down on the rungs.

They made it to the tram, but it was offline. "Great," sighed Zule. She sat down on the platform, slipping in under the railing, panting.

"It runs on a rail," Sanya said.

"Yeah, it's a tram, of course it does."

"Metal on metal. That's low friction."

Zule perked up. "We could push it-"

"*I* could push it. You take it easy, you're hurt," Sanya said. She threw the rocket launcher and detonators aboard, and helped Zule up.

Pushing the tram was a lot harder than Sanya expected. She put all her minuscule weight into the tram, shoes slipping on the metal beneath her, but it began to move. Slowly, at first, but the more Sanya pushed, the more the tram slid forward. She was now walking, now jogging, and now running to keep up with the tram as it rumbled along. Finally, she had to jump for the railing and haul herself aboard.

"I didn't think we'd be able to go this fast without power," said Zule. She'd torn a strip off her jumpsuit's leg and used it to make impromptu bandages.

"Me either," gasped Sanya, lying on her back.

They went on for another minute. "Um, Zule, shouldn't we be slowing down by now?" asked Sanya.

"Nope," said Zule. "The braking system is electromagnetic. Right now, our brakes are the end of the rail."

"That sounds dangerous."

"Yeah, it is." Zule gathered up the detonators. "I'll hold onto these, you take the rocket launcher. Make sure the safety is on."

"Right."

There was no light in the tram tunnel. Zule had a little pocket flashlight, that was it. They'd have no warning for the end of the rail, except Zule's reckoning. "Okay, I think we're coming up, let's get on the other side of this railing. There's a lot of open space in the hyperdrive chamber, I'd rather risk a fall on that than getting bent in two around the railing."

Sanya and Zule had just gotten themselves on the other side when the tram crashed against something, and they went tumbling to the deck. Sanya landed on her back, rocket launcher clutched in her arms. "Ow... What now, Zule?"

"Give me the launcher," Zule said.

Sanya was glad to hand it over.

"See those lights down the tunnel?"

"Yeah."

"Those are the commandos' visors. They're making good time."

"So what do we do?"

"Watch for backblast. And make this shot count, I've only got one."

Sanya took cover by... something. She wasn't sure what, the hyperdrive chamber had no lights and she'd turned the flashlight off. Then, with a fiery fwoosh, a rocket soared down the tunnel, exhaust flames burning a bright violet. Someone shouted, and it echoed with the explosion.

"Did you get them?" asked Sanya.

"Uh... one. The other's still coming."

Sanya reached out into the Force, trying to feel what was around her. Zule was there, flagging and exhausted, and further off, there was another presence. Hostile, furious. Cold fear gripped Sanya. "Zule, what do we do? He's got a *shield!*"

"A ray shield," Zule said. "If we can get something physical through, like one of these detonators-"

"Then how do we get past his armor? You know that's not ordinary plastoid!"

Zule let out an anxious breath. "I don't know! I'll- I'll think of something!" Down the tunnel, the blue light of the visitor drew nearer. "Oh, to hell with it!" Zule growled. She armed a detonator, and tossed it.

There was a dull blast in the tunnel, as the detonator exploded. Zule threw another, and another, and another, and then she had nothing but her lightsaber. And out of the tunnel came the commando, looking battered in the blade's green glow, but very much alive.

"You've killed my team," the commando said, as cold as ice. "Now I'll kill you."

Zule roared, and charged in with her lightsaber. The clone raised one arm, and used his shield to block the blow, and on the other, his vibroblade deployed. He slashed at Zule, slicing off a few centimeters of her hair, and leaving a bloody gash in her already-wounded shoulder. The shield began to flicker under Zule's sustained attacks. Once again, all Sanya could do was shoot her blaster, trying to hold it steady in her shaking hands.

The clone got a kick in on Zule, sending her stumbling back. He seized her mechanical wrist, and flung her up and over him, slamming her into the deck. Zule tried to crawl away, but the clone brought his boot down on her leg, and with a wet snap, broke it. She screamed.

Sanya felt the bile rise in her stomach, even if she could hardly see what had happened. "Zule!" she cried.

"Take it, Sanya!" Zule threw her lightsaber. The clone tracked the lightsaber glinting in the dark as it flew, and Sanya caught it, snapping the blade on. Leaving Zule crippled and bleeding on the deck, the commando advanced, a pale column in the gloom.

"I'll make this quick, Seppie," said the clone.

Sanya jabbed out with the lightsaber, trying to keep the clone away. He was thirty centimeters taller and had the arms to match, even with his smaller wrist-mounted vibroblade, the commando soon dictated the fight. Onward and onward he came, pushing Sanya further into the utter darkness of the hyperdrive chamber. Her legs bumped against unseen machinery, she stumbled and tripped backwards. The commando slammed his vibroblade down after her, it skittered off the deck in a shower of sparks. Sanya swung the lightsaber at the vibroblade, and the weapon was sliced in half.

It was outside his shield, she realized. Seizing on the chance, Sanya went back on the offensive, trying to hit the shielded clone as fast as she could, to overpower his shield generator. It was working, the shield was flickering, Sanya got the lightsaber through it and hit a glancing blow to his arm-

But as she'd lunged forward to strike, the clone grabbed her sword arm. His powerful armored hand closed over her small unarmored one, and squeezed. Sanya screamed as she heard the bones cracking, tears flooded her eyes, and the lightsaber fell onto the deck and went off, plunging the chamber into total darkness, but for that blue T-shaped visor. The visor rushed forward, and the helmet slammed into her head. Sanya fell to the deck, holding her crushed hand, sobbing.

"Pathetic," said the clone commando, looming over her.

A flash of blue flame caught Sanya's eyes, and the clone's head began to turn. Something thumped on the deck, and then the clone froze as arcs of electricity flowed over him, crackling and sizzling. It went on and on, until Sanya could smell that sickly-sweet scent of burning flesh, and the armored warrior fell, lifeless.

Behind him was a soft red circle of light. The photoceptor of an astromech droid.

"R8!" Sanya said.

R8 beeped and cooed.

"I- thank you, R8. I don't- where- why-"

The droid made a falling whistle.

"I don't understand you." Sanya closed her eyes, and tried to calm herself. "Please get help, R8. Tell them the ship is safe, okay?"

The astromech droid chirped, and deployed his jets, flying off the way he came. *Saved, by a droid,* Sanya thought. Esera's astromech had been an elusive presence aboard. But he'd turned up at exactly the right moment. Sanya sought out Zule's weak presence in the Force, and pushed herself to her fallen friend. Zule had passed out. All Sanya could do was try to elevator her broken leg, and stem the bleeding.

The Mistryl Army was good, there was no denying that. They were giving as hard as they took, and in some sectors of the city they'd even eliminated the enemy invaders. But the palace was under attack by the Sun Guard, some of the finest mercenaries in the Galaxy. It was not to Esera's surprise that they'd already breached the perimeter and were in the halls.

Leaving the catatonic ARC trooper in the landspeeder, Esera rushed into the palace, intent on getting to Voyan before the enemy did. The Sun Guard had already blundered into the residence wing of the palace, though, and Esera found a squad of them between her and her engineer.

Naturally, they were tall, far taller than she was. They towered over her, but they were as slim as Voyan, limbs long and graceful. They wore black armor, looking like militarized versions of the Chancellor's Red Guard, or perhaps the Red Guard looked like them. Their visors glowed red, and they raised their weapons. *Force pikes,* Esera thought, eyeing the tips of those meter-long weapons.

"I'm not with the Emberleners," Esera told them. "Let me through and no harm will come to you."

"This *female* thinks she can threaten us," one of the Sun Guard said, *female* spoken with such disgust he might have been referring to vermin. The others laughed.

"This female knows she can threaten you," said Esera. She ignited her lightsaber. *Great, as if the Emberleners weren't bad enough, now I have to deal with their opposites!* "I am here on behalf of the Confederacy of Independent Systems, I have no part in your war. Step aside, now."

"Lightsabers don't scare us," said the apparent Sun Guard leader. "Put down your toy, and we let *you* live, once we've had our fun." The rest of the mercenaries snickered.

"I'm warning you, I'm the personal envoy of General Grievous-"

Their leader cut her off. "If she breathes, she's a harlot. Make her suffer." He waved his men forward.

Esera's fraying patience ran out. *Fine then, have it your way!* She rushed forward, closing the distance to the first Sun Guard before he could react, and impaled him through the heart. Esera flicked her wrist and the blade burned its way out of the dead man. His presence vanishing in the Force hardly registered with her. She swung at the next, but he raised his pike, and her lightsaber shorted out on contact.

Cortosis! Esera wanted to scream. Instead, she jumped over the rest, and ran for her suite. These Sun Guard might have been ready for a lightsaber, They were missing another kind of weapon, though. Unburdened by armor and aided by the Force, Esera made it back long before the Sun Guard caught up. They were coming around the corner when she locked the door behind her.

"Esera- uh, Captain, glad you're here," said Voyan, standing up.

"Yeah, me too," said Esera, silently noting they were back to ranks and not first names. "We need to get out of here, commander-" A pounding came at the door and it buckled inward, as the Sun Guard began trying to break it down.

"Agreed," said Voyan.

"Come with me." Esera opened a window, and looked down. It was a three story drop. Luckily, she had her utility belt.

"Out the window?" asked Voyan.

"You want to deal with the Sun Guard or me, commander?"

Voyan sighed. "You, Captain." They climbed out onto the ledge, and Esera got out her grappling line and hooked it into the ledge above. "Wait, we're not-"

"Hold on," said Esera. Voyan grabbed onto her, just as she kicked off the ledge. They fell down and out, until the line caught, and they went swinging onto the ledge below. The glass of the window didn't shatter when they slammed into it, a testament to the builders. Esera got out her lightsaber and cut her way in.

"What's the plan?" asked Voyan, a little paler than usual from the drop. Esera looked around the apartment, there was a blaster hanging on the wall. She took it, and flipped the safety off.

"This is convenient," she said. "Now we wait."

"For what-"

The Sun Guard came crashing in through the window, swinging on their own cables. Esera raised the blaster, and dropped three of them before their boots even touched the floor. Two remained. They were frozen where they stood.

"Get me in touch with your commander," Esera told them. "And I won't kill you."

"Go to hell," said one of the Sun Guard. He leveled his pike and jumped at her. Esera shot him.

"How about you?" she asked.

The mercenary looked around at his dead comrades, and then back at her. "I will not surrender to a woman!" he declared, in a shaking voice.

"Commander, please accept the Sun Guard's surrender," Esera said.

Both men looked at her, but Voyan was quick on the uptake. "I am Commander Miha Voyan, chief engineer of the warship *Encounter*," he said. "I will accept your surrender."

The Sun Guard dropped his force pike, and removed his helmet. The man behind the mask was outwardly a Human, a dark-skinned Human. His black hair was long and straight, his eyes a startling blue. High cheekbones and a strong, hawkish nose gave him a regal appearance. *So, this is a Thyrsian,* thought Esera. Related to the Ecchani, who themselves were genetically modified Humans. All things considered, this man *was* Human, as Human as the Emberleners. In fact, he was more closely related to any Emberlener than he was to Esera or Voyan.

"Commander Miha Voyan would be very pleased if you could get me, Captain Esera Komara, in contact with your commanding officer," Esera told him.

"I… um, very well," said the man, eyeing the blaster still trained on his chest.

It took the rest of the day and more threats of violence and mayhem than she'd ever made in her life to get a ceasefire between the Authala Alliance, their mercenaries, and the Emberleners. No one was listening to her until *Encounter* suddenly powered up her engines and began to race back to the planet. With one angry *Rescuant*-class destroyer coming in at full speed against the massively depleted Alliance fleet, many of which had landed to deposit their troops and vehicles, everyone was suddenly willing to take her seriously. The patriarchal roots of the Sun Guard only made things more difficult, Esera often had to voice herself through Voyan just to get them to listen.

Voyan was a good sport about it all. Learning that their ship was more or less in one piece and the crew were all alive had put them both at great ease. Esera was going to visit the medbay first thing upon her return, but her work on Emberlene wasn't done.

In the following days, she and Voyan hammered out a peace treaty, with one huge gun named General Grievous pointed at the collective heads of everyone involved. "The Confederacy wants Emberlene left intact," she told the leaders of the Alliance. "They started this war and they'll pay for it, but on our terms. That's not negotiable. If you've got a problem with that, you can come to Raxus and challenge Grievous. I'm sure he'd *love* to hear that you doubted my authority and his sincerity."

Emberlene would repay the Alliance their stolen property, and a single lump-sum reparations payment of precious metals, resources, and items of value on top of that. Emberlene was banned from warship construction for ten years. The Emberlene system would be held under quarantine for those ten years, no craft would enter or exit the system without the explicit permission of the Confederacy of Independent Systems, the guarantor of the peace.

"This isn't a peace treaty, this is a twenty year armistice," one of the Authala Alliance diplomats told Esera.

"I know," she said. "Without any outside interference, you'll be fighting Emberlene again, guaranteed. But there's tens of thousands of Emberleners in our fleet. When they come home after years in the wider Galaxy, who knows what'll happen?"

The Alliance wasn't convinced any change would happen. The Emberleners had always been aggressive and militant. They always would be. But this time, they'd be ready. Or so Esera hoped.

The final demand was from the Sun Guard, that they be allowed to fight the Mistryl Army's best face to face one last time before the treaty went into effect. The Emberleners demanded they'd be allowed to accept the challenge. Esera allowed it, begrudgingly.

At the spaceport, where *Whirlwind* had been cloaked and thus spared destruction by strafing Alliance fighters, Mila Aredian and General Taclai came to see Esera and Voyan off, flanked by their Shadow Guard.

"You've done us a great service, Lady Komara," Aredian said, with a smug smirk.

"Another day to fight will come," Taclai agreed. "Maybe next time you'll be on the other side, Komara. Things would turn out differently."

"I doubt it," said Esera, frowning.

"Well, I'll be dead by then," said Aredian. "It's a shame some of my last acts as Eldest were agreeing to this humiliation. I think my final act will be to lay out the plans for a new fleet. We can't start building it yet, but we can gather the materials and training crews. That's a little oversight in your treaty, Lady Komara. You need to watch out for these things."

Esera put a hand over her eyes and sighed. The treaty had been ratified, there was no going back now.

"Gloat while you can, *wise woman*," Voyan said, with venom. He might as well have called her *witch*. "The rest of the Authala Sector won't be taken by surprise."

"Such spirit in this boy!" Taclai laughed. "Please come again, Komara. I'll give this whelp a proper breaking. And you too."

"Sun Guard, Mistryl Army, you're both awful," Esera told them. "I hope you both kill each other out there. The Galaxy could use less of both of you., and all the horrible things you preach. Because *this,*" she took Voyan's hand in her own, thinking of what he'd said at breakfast a few days ago, "is real strength. It's sad that neither of you will ever realize that."

"Cute." Aredian waved her hand. "Get off my planet, Komara. Take your barbarian play-thing with you." The dark side was stirring in the old woman, and Esera was in no mood to test it. Without another word, she and Voyan went up *Whirlwind*'s ramp.

On the flight up, a question popped into Esera's head, something she'd forgotten about in the heat of the moment. "Hey, Voyan."

"Yeah?"

"What was it you were telling me, when our passenger down there tried to choke me out?" Esera pointed down, to the ARC trooper laying still in the gurney, as he had for days.

"Oh, that. I was telling you to gouge his eyes out," said Voyan. He noticed her shocked look. "One of the things the Hutt cartel thugs taught us, back home. In a street fight, the only rules are that there are no rules."

Esera shook her head. "You really are a barbarian."

But I would have done it, if Aredian hadn't showed up, she thought. She'd dropped those Sun Guard men without mercy, just to make a point. She'd condemned a sector to another war their children would have to fight, just to keep a few thousand warriors in Grievous's service. *I really am getting more like him... No, Esera, focus on the good things. You saved a lot of the innocent people on Emberlene from getting killed. You kept honorable warriors on our side. You walked all over the awful ideologies of these tyrants, you and Voyan working together is the only proof you need to prove they're full of it!*

"So, Captain," Voyan said, "where are we going next?"

"I need to drop this clone off with someone. Then, it's off to Zoma V-" *Whirlwind*'s communication alert started to chime. Esera pushed the button. "Captain Komara here."

The hologram of her least favorite droid in the Galaxy appeared, wrapped up in his ridiculous black cloak. "Captain Komara," said a deep mechanical voice. "It has been a while."

"Khan," Esera said, her eyes narrowing. "I was just starting to feel good, and then you turn up."

"Inconsiderate," said the super tactical droid, managing to sound almost hurt.

"What do you want? Does it have to do with your mad science experiment?"

"Yes, actually. Alpha is fully functional and online. She is very interested in meeting you. You and your mechanic played such a large role in her development, I am obliged to invite you once again to my ship." Khan arms moved under his cloak, but it obscured whatever mimicry of Human body language he was making.

"No can do, Khan, we're going to Zoma V, that's way out of your usual hunting grounds."

"Why, Captain Komara, I happen to be at Druckenwell right now, investigating the abandoned Republic base here. Is that not on the Corellian Run, the principal hyperlane that would take you in the direction of Zoma V?"

"Fine, we'll meet you there in a few days," Esera huffed, and she turned off the transmission.

"Khan, Alpha, and Druckenwell, this should be fun," muttered Voyan. *Oh, right, Druckenwell is where he went to school,* Esera realized.

She leaned back in the pilot's chair. "Never a quiet moment, in Confederate Naval Intelligence..." And there was still the matter of Janus Greejatus, Darth Sidious's old associate, and why he'd had elite clone troopers stealing a Sith holocron off of a backwater nowhere planet like Emberlene. What was he up to?

Days and days had passed since Tarkin gave the approval to terminate Esera Komara. He hadn't thought about it since, in fact. Not until Janus Greejatus appeared in his office, with his formal after-action report of the Emberlene mission, Ardabur Aspar in his presence.

"I take it your men were successful?" asked Tarkin.

"In the primary objective," said Greejatus.

"The secondary?"

Greejatus shrugged. "We lost contact with the commandos sent against the traitor's ship, *Encounter*. The ARC team on the surface came back one man less. They can't confirm if Komara is dead or not, so best to assume she's alive."

"Who is this traitor Jedi, anyway?" Tarkin asked, noticing how Aspar had stirred at the mention of the name.

"Traitorous *Dark* Jedi, my lord, according to the Temple's records," Aspar said. "She turned Separatist seven or eight months ago at Shumavar."

"You two have a history."

"Yes, my lord." Aspar put a hand on his mask. "This was her work."

"Is she someone I should be concerned about?"

No answer came immediately. The former Jedi looked away for a few moments, hand on chin, before speaking again. "By herself, she's nobody. That girl's never had a backbone that someone didn't put in her first. But I have heard she's in close association with Grievous. If he's placed value on her, then she's worth taking out, just for that."

"So it would seem..." Tarkin typed a quick memo on his console. "I'll inform our intelligence agencies to take any shot they can get at her. Will that satisfy you, General Aspar?"

"The only thing more satisfying would be taking her down myself," said Aspar.

"That chance may yet come, my boy. Greejatus, what did you find at Emberlene?"

Palpatine's old lackey gave Aspar a concerned look. *Does he know?* it seemed to say. Tarkin nodded, and Greejatus placed a case on Tarkin's desk, and opened it. Inside, held in padding, was a little black pyramid. "The artifact, my lord."

"A holocron," Aspar said, leaning over to look at it. "A Sith holocron, my lord."

"Those are like computers, right?" Tarkin asked, picking up the pyramid. It was cold to the touch, ice cold.

"More or less," Greejatus said. "You need to be Force-sensitive to use them. Like so." He held out a hand over the pyramid, and the black sides were suddenly aglow with fiery alien glyphs that then projected into the air. Aspar gave Greejatus what looked like a surprised glance. The office grew darker, quieter, and Tarkin had a feeling. A peculiar feeling. Like something had brushed the back of his neck, but in his mind. He'd thought this thing had a one in a thousand chance of being useful. But there was something about that thing that made him think otherwise, now. A power stirred in that object.

"What is this?" he asked, quietly.

"I don't know. This object was found in space a few hundred years ago," said Greejatus. That did not surprise Tarkin; the holocron was so cold that it could have only come from space. And it'd been in space a long, long time, if it was still this cold after hundreds of years. "My master's records state only that it presents an alternative to the superlaser, nothing else."

Aspar stared intently at the glyphs. "This is Sith. The ancient language, that is."

"Can you read it?" asked Tarkin.

"No. Maybe one of the masters in the Temple could. Yoda, or Jocasta Nu, maybe. Besides them..." Aspar looked off, in the direction of the Center for Military Operations. "There's only one other person on this planet who might be able to read this."

"Maul," Greejatus said, with a frown.

Tarkin placed the pyramid back in its case, glad to be rid of the freezing cold thing. "We'd better pay Maul a visit, then."

Author's note: You know, Valued Readers, I actually had this entire chapter outlined in detail. And guess what? It didn't help me write it in a timely manner one bit. I blame the action scenes, the Tarkin and Grievous stuff was done weeks ago. I'm a little sad to see Mila "what if grandma was a wannabe Sith" Aredian and General "no first name" Taclai go. They were a lot of fun to write (but Esera bullying is always fun for me to write, tbh). And how often do you get to see women over the age of 60 in such roles? We love our diversity, folks. I regret not being able to expound more on the Thyrsians, who I've modeled after James Earl Jones' portrayal of Thulsa Doom mixed with some of the generalized East African phenotype thrown in. The Thyrsian physiology is well-adapted to a hot, sunny environment. And the Sun Guard are very much, uh, space radical salafists in how they view women. Space Taliban might be too loaded a term right now (I've got my eye on the Valued Reviewer who told me to stop believing Western propaganda a few weeks before Kabul fell, I'll make fun of you if they start pulling their antics from the 90s).

Alright, that's all from me for today. As always, thanks to Corshy for editing my late-night rambling first draft. This one was super late night and I'm sure mistakes slipped through. We've got two new-ish faces next chapter, I've been waiting for this one for a long time! It's a """filler""" chapter as Valued Action Junkies call it, so I'll probably have it done in two weeks.

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